

Sustainable fashion: How to cut the environmental cost of your clothes

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By Graham Lawton

From renting clothes to ditching the tumble drier, there are plenty of things you can do to reduce the environmental price tag of your wardrobe.

If your wardrobe contains items of clothing you bought on the high street for relatively low cost, you are a participant in the fast-fashion industry. But don't feel too guilty. Everybody needs clothes and dressing sustainably can be complicated. With a little know-how, however, there are things we can all do to look good without the environmental price tag.

The first step is to think long term, says Kirsi Niinimäki at Aalto University in Espoo, Finland: "Short use-time of garments is really harmful for the environment."



We can all take steps to cut the environmental impact of our clothing

She suggests you start by liking what you have. Go through your wardrobe and dig out any long forgotten garments that you can start to use again.

If you want a change of look, or need a particular item, consider using flea markets, buying second-hand or holding clothes swapping events with friends. Apps and websites that allow you to lease clothes from others, and get more use out of your own pre-loved items by renting them out, are increasingly common. Some fashion labels are also working with the makers of the apps, so you can rent clothes directly from them, with the quality control that comes with it.

Shopping for new clothes requires a shift of mindset away from the budget-friendly lure of fast fashion. "If buying something new, see garments as an investment," says Niinimäki. "Think about the quality and if the style is something we can use for a longer time." Many companies offer a repair service. "As consumers, I think that we can educate ourselves a bit more about garments and the fibres that they are made of," she says.

Once an item is in your wardrobe, how you look after it can make a difference. "There's the old adage, buy better, buy less," says Jaki Love, director of innovation and sustainability at UKFT (the UK Fashion and Textile Association). "But the majority of negative impacts from fashion actually occur post-sale, and so consumers have it within their gift to reduce this impact through how they launder."

So, wash clothing sparingly, avoid tumble-drying and iron only when necessary, to reduce the amounts of water, energy and detergent involved.

"And when it comes to disposal, if a garment is in a condition that somebody else can wear it, return it to the market. If it's really like a waste, find a place that accepts the textile waste."

It is also important to question any claims you read on labels or in shops, which can be misleading. A recent report by the Changing Markets Foundation in the Netherlands found that certification programmes designed to clean up the fashion industry can backfire, leading to greater consumption, pollution and use of fossil fuels.

There are some handy resources to help you cut through the hype. The Fashion Transparency Index ranks 250 of the world's largest fashion brands and retailers according to what information they disclose about their environmental and social policies. You can also check a clothing brand's green, social and animal welfare credentials at the Good On You directory. Ultimately, when you buy

something new you need to ask yourself three questions, says Mart Drake-Knight, founder of sustainable clothing brand Teemill in the UK. “Who made it? What is it made from? And where will it end up when I am done with it?”